

TRAVELLING TO THE LOST CITIES OF OMAN

Each settlement tells its own story, hiding in the subtle signs left behind, markers of a time long past. Coming from India, the cradle of history, I felt compelled to explore the historical canvas of Oman. What I found was enriching.



QALHAT



SALUT

BY AMIT NARANG

After an uneventful first three hours, the road from Duqm to Salalah reaches the green waters of the Arabian Sea and then hugs the coastline to Salalah. As it crosses the spectacular cliff-lined vistas of Al Shuwamiyah and Mirbat, the remains of a lost city come into view. A city perched on top of a hill, framed on its back by the picturesque (though seasonal) Darbat waterfall and overlooking the blue lagoon of Khor Rori.

THE FRANKINCENSE PORT

The city of Sumharam, dating back to the 3rd century BCE, harks back to a time when Oman was a key international entrepôt and a

once-thriving trading city of Qalhat, the twin capital of the kingdom of Ormuz (Hormuz). It flourished as a major centre in the Indian Ocean trading network, with thriving connections to Arabia, Africa, India, China and South-East Asia. Qalhat is the only city in Oman that is mentioned by Marco Polo (which he calls Calatu). The famous Moroccan explorer Ibn Battuta describes it in the 14th century as one having 'fine bazaars and one of the most beautiful mosques'. It is also a place reportedly visited by the Chinese voyager Zheng He. The city itself had a large resident Indian community due to the close trading links — in dates and horses — with the western coast of India.

All that remains today are some water cisterns and visible city foundations, along with the mausoleum of Bibi Maryam, who herself

deserved recognition.

TOMBS OF ETERNITY

In the backdrop of the majestic Jabal Al Misht, not far from the town of Ibbri in the village of Al Ayn, stand 19 beehive stone tombs. UNESCO has included these along with the nearby Bat necropolis and the monumental tower at Al Khutm as a World Heritage Site and describes this protohistoric archaeological complex as representing 'one of the most complete and well-preserved ensembles of settlements and necropolises from the 3rd millennium BCE worldwide'. The tombs are from a period when Oman was a significant global centre for copper mining and trade.

Across aeons, kingdoms and empires rose and fell, and lofty pal-



SUMHARAM

centre for global trade in frankincense. The city is mentioned in the ancient Greek treatise Periplus of the Erythraean Sea as Moscha Limen, a great trading outpost for merchant ships travelling the immense distances between the Mediterranean, Egypt and the Indus Valley civilisation in India. Its wealth and grandeur can be witnessed even today in the remains of the huge fortified walls, a monumental gate, multistorey residences, warehouses and temples as well as several private and public buildings. Standing inside these magnificent ruins, one can picture basketloads of Omani frankincense being

was one of Qalhat's most notable rulers. The rest of the city was destroyed after its occupation by the Portuguese and abandoned later.

WHERE THE EAGLE DARED

King Solomon, from the biblical tales, is said to have visited it on one of his flying trips, finding a 'castle already standing of which no memory remained' and an eagle as its sole inhabitant. Centuries later as per legends, it was the site of the famous battle of Salut where Malik Ibn Fahm routed the Persians, a key milestone in the history of Oman.

aces and fearsome castles disappeared and were reduced to dust. But these simple structures, created by stacked stones with basic mud mortar, are still standing for 5000 years. Our humble Bronze Age stone architects also deserve credit for good real estate spotting; for they chose what arguably is one of the most scenic mountainous locales in all of Oman.

CROSSROADS OF HISTORY

History is a complex weave of human stories, endeavours and experiences juxtaposed on a grand canvas of geography and time.



UBAR

loaded onto ships destined for far-away shores. The unique beauty of the site, perched as it is between the ocean and the mountain, lends it a magical touch that adds to its historical significance as a key node of global trade in ancient times.

THE ATLANTIS OF THE SANDS

A later trip to the town of Thamrait, a two-hour drive from Salalah, brought me to the archaeological remains of the mythical city of Ubar, which is mentioned in the Holy Quran and nicknamed the lost Atlantis of the Sands by TE Lawrence (of Arabia). It was discovered by a team of Los Angeles-based archaeologists using literary investigation and satellite imagery. Despite its legendary story, it is hardly known or recognised, and it took a bit of convincing to make the driver take us to the nondescript village of Shisr where it exists as the ruins of a long lost settlement that vanished into the sands as the limestone cavern under it collapsed into a sinkhole. This lost city of Ubar, on the edge of the Rab al Khali, was also a key outpost of the frankincense trade and seems to have been built 5000 years ago. Today all that survives are some structures and a massive sunken wall.

THE HORMUZ QUEEN'S MAUSOLEUM

On my first drive from Sur to Muscat, I caught a glimpse of a lone mausoleum standing next to the sea, not far from the popular tourist spot of Wadi Shab. This Mausoleum of Bibi Maryam, as I discovered later, was part of the



BAT & AL AYN

Located just 20 minutes from the town of Bahla, the Salut Castle is easily one of the most important historical sites in Oman, albeit perhaps also one of the least known or visited. With continuous habitation across the Bronze and Iron ages, spanning a staggering 3500 years, from 3000 BCE to 300 CE, this major urban centre was a key node of global commerce in copper, found abundantly in the Al Hajar Mountains, and had extensive contacts with Mesopotamia and Indus Valley civilization in India.

Showcasing a rich collection of artefacts and historical objects — including pottery with snake motifs, shell make-up kits, India-made necklaces for women, and seals modelled on the artwork of Indus Valley culture — the newly developed Visitor Centre at the Salut Archaeological site is itself well worth every Baiza (it's free actually). The site has been included in the tentative listing for a future nomination as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, which will be a much-

Each settlement tells its own story, hiding in the subtle signs left behind, markers of a time long past. Coming from India, the cradle of history, I felt compelled to explore the historical canvas of Oman. What I found was enriching. The 5 historical sites in Oman explored here are a tribute to the rich unbroken history of Oman and its role as a key centre in the timeless march of global caravans of history.

A lot like the gracious Omani hospitality, there is much to discover and admire in the rich tapestry of Omani heritage.



The writer is Ambassador of India to the Sultanate of Oman